

INCISED STONES FROM GLENORMISTON STATION, S.W. QUEENSLAND

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes an Aboriginal cache of incised stones and an associated myth. The stones, incised designs, and story are then discussed in the light of other evidence for Aboriginal culture in S.W. Queensland.

INTRODUCTION

Many years ago Charlie Trottmann, an elderly Aborigine from Glenormiston Station showed Jim Newman (widely known as 'Old Kookaburra') an Aboriginal cache in a small rockhole near Lake Wonditti, northeast of Glenormiston homestead, S.W. Queensland (Lat. 22°55'S, Long 138°48'E). The cache comprised natural stones which were said by the local Arraringa people to be a stone boomerang, knife, healing stone, and kadaitcha shoe. A solitary mulga tree adjacent to the rockhole was said to have been a spear.

The cache site is close to a tailing yard and over the years the material was removed several times for examination by musterers camped nearby. As a result the stone knife had disappeared and Mr Newman, who is of Kalkadoon descent, feared for the safety of the remaining items. In 1977, he contacted one of the authors (M.G.) and asked for the items to be removed to a place of safe-keeping. They are now in the collection of the Queensland Museum (Reg. No. S362/1-3). This paper is written with the consent and co-operation of Mr Newman.

The associated mythology of the material concerns a Kalkadoon man who had been promised a wife by the local people, and who travelled down to Lake Wonditti for this purpose. Finding nobody there he threw his equipment into the rockhole and vanished. The story is best told as explained by Jim Newman to Kate Sutcliffe (Archaeology Branch, D.A.I.A.) during a taped interview.

'A man had been around here cooking and got friendly with this dark old fella and he tell me a story then. The black fella call it religion. You see it is a religion to them. He showed me these things — stone boomerangs, stone knife,

what they cut the kidneys out with, and a healing stone, what they heal the wound up with. You got to put it in the fire like a soldering iron. You put the stone in the fire then you put it on the wound and heal it up and its as good as new again.

So I want to get to the bottom, to get the full story how he got there to leave no feathers there. Well he said he come across from here between Cloncurry and the Georgina. According to this old fella telling the story, telling it to me, he had to go and pick up his little wife what the black fella gave him in black fella law. He had to go and get his wife. When he go there, there was no one there at this one little lake-waterhole. It's a lovely big lake fresh water, but it was milky, the colour was milky.

So, I'm baking bread one afternoon and this old fella said to me, "I'll show you devil directly". I wasn't interested about the devil at all, I went about cooking my bread. So at last I gave up.

Not very far away from where our camp was, he had a little shallow cave with all these stones in it — the boomerang, the kadaitcha shoe, like these T..... It was all red stone.

Well I said, "How he get there then?" He couldn't find this girl, nobody there, tribe's gone. So, well he pulls his boots off. Threw them into this cave — stone knife, and the boomerang and this healing stone. In they go. He stuck his spear in the ground alongside the cave. And he told me that from the spear this little mulga tree grow. And there's no mulga around the placc within 40 mile around in the area. All the rest of the trees are whitewood, bloodwood, coolibah, gum.

And I said "What happened to him then?", I said. Well, he said he just went like this

“choo!”. He said, he went straight up into the cloud. Well I said “He must be still up there then. How could he disappear into the cloud, a Kalkadoon black fella and leave all his gear behind.” He said “choo!” like somebody give him a bump and away he went.

Well, that’s the end of that old story. It was handed down to one another. They handed it down to me and now I’m giving it to you on tape’.

DESCRIPTION

The Glenormiston cache comprised three limestone fragments of unusual shape. Each has a natural surface staining/patina of red colouration. Almost certainly the material is derived from an exposure of Georgina limestone which outcrops immediately south of Glenormiston Station (Dr. Neville Stevens; pers. comm.).

The ‘*boomerang*’ is an elongate, arc-shaped fragment measuring 48.0 cm in length, 11.0 cm in width and 4.2 cm in thickness. At one end sinuous lines, a circle, and a bird track have been incised to a depth of approximately 0.2 mm (Fig. 1a). The incised motifs are of the same colour as the unmodified limestone surface.

The ‘*kadaitcha shoe*’ is a weathered fragment 23.5 cm in length, 11.0 cm in width and 4.9 cm in thickness. Fine bedding lines 2 mm apart occur at right angles to the long axis, while the upper surface has an irregular topography of ridges and grooves formed by solution grooving. A pattern of shallowly incised concentric circles and connecting lines occurs on the upper surface (Fig. 1b). The lower surface is slightly convex in cross-section and bears a finely incised figure of an Aboriginal warrior with shield, spear, spear-thrower, head-dress, and body decoration (Fig. 1c). All of the incised designs on the fragment are shallow and approximately 0.1 mm in depth and thickness. The incised designs are similar in colouration to the remainder of the fragment, and accurate discernment requires oblique lighting. It is apparent that the incised designs are of some antiquity as more recent scratches of similar depth are white in colour.

The ‘*healing stone*’ is water-rolled and roughly spherical in shape. It has a maximum diameter of 6.9 cm and exhibits bruising and patina loss in one area. However, the white colouration of this suggests that it is probably modern damage.

DISCUSSION

McCarthy (1976, p. 66) notes that Aboriginal incised stones have been found in New South Wales and Queensland ‘but they are very rare’. The Glenormiston examples are significant not only because such artefacts are uncommon, but also because the associated mythology is known. ‘Old Kookaburra’ (pers. comm.) states that he knows of a similar cache located between Glenormiston and Tobbomoree (N.T.) Stations, so the find is not unique. For example, Stubbs (1974, p. 86) illustrates a fine-grained, igneous rock with an incised, linear pattern which was found on Glenormiston Station. An incised pebble was also recovered from a rock hollow at a rock engraving site near Mt. Isa (pers. knowledge). Designs on this pebble include a grid, a dot series, a concentric circle, and a 5-tiered chevron (see Armstrong n.d., p. 58). Unfortunately, the ceremonial context and function of such items is unknown.

The incised motifs are of particular interest as they probably relate to the associated mythology. Those on the stone ‘boomerang’ and the upper surface of the ‘kadaitcha shoe’ can be closely matched in motif emphasis and composition with designs found on other items of material culture from the area — e.g. boomerangs, *tjurunga*. Kelly (1968, p. 565) for instance, describes concentric circles and a sinuous line incised on a *tjurunga* of an elder of the Mulligan river *woma* snake totem. Circles, concentric circles, spirals, sinuous lines, and bird tracks are also widely used in the numerous rock art assemblages of western Queensland (Elkin 1949/50; Morwood 1979). Typically, there is a high proportion of non-figurative designs and many of these are shared with assemblages of central Australian art (cf. Edwards 1965, 1966; Mountford 1960; Mountford and Edwards 1963).

The incised figure on the ‘kadaitcha shoe’ (Fig. 1c) is very different from other figurative motifs known from the area. Normally the figurative component of western Queensland Aboriginal art would fall into Maynard’s ‘Simple Figurative’ category. (Maynard 1976). It is crudely naturalistic, rigid, standardised, and comprises simplified silhouettes of humans and animals. Humans are usually male and depicted from the front with splayed legs and exaggerated penises. Anatomical detail is minimal and the figures lack facial features and body contours.

By contrast the Glenormiston incised figure is depicted in twisted perspective and conveys a

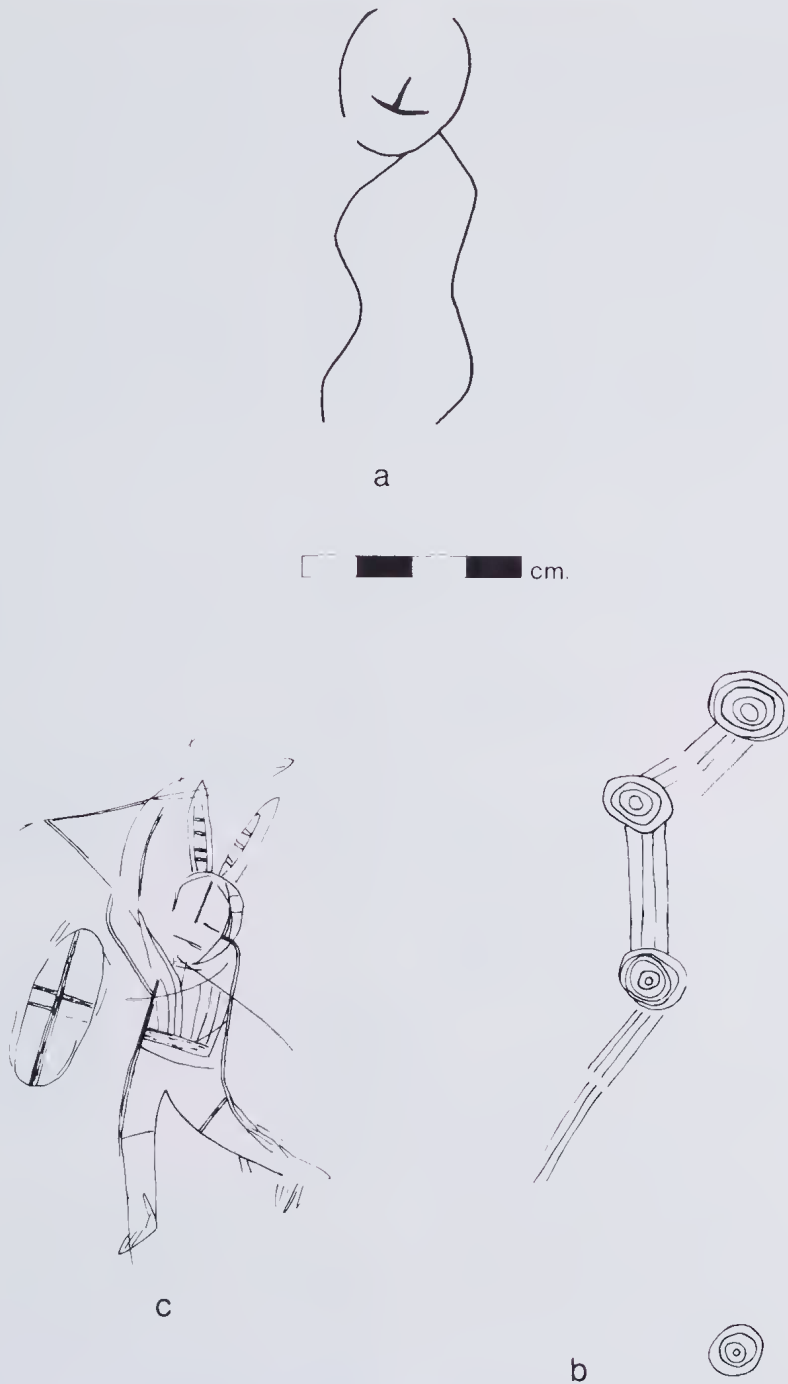


FIGURE 1. Designs incised on items from the Glenormiston cache

- a) Track-line-circle composition on the 'boomerang'.
- b) Line-circle composition on the upper surface of the 'kadaitcha shoe'.
- c) Figure of an Aboriginal warrior on the lower surface of the 'kadaitcha shoe'.

sense of movement. The amount of detail shown and the fact that the principal outlines of the body were carefully incised several times suggests that the task was not undertaken casually but was of some importance. Facial features and body contours are shown, while body decoration and associated weapons are accurately depicted — the figure advances clutching a decorated shield with the right arm poised to propel a spear from a spear-thrower. Although the associated story concerns a Kalkadoon man, it is interesting that the spear-thrower illustrated is of the flattened, leaf-shaped type used on the upper Mulligan and upper Georgina Rivers and along the Toko Range (i.e. local). It is quite different from the linear lath type used by the Kalkadoon in the Boulia, Leichhardt-Selwyn and Cloncurry districts (Roth 1897, pp. 148–9 and Fig. 372). Body decoration includes a head-dress (possibly feathers or ceremonial items), a series of vertical lines down the chest (probably body paintings) a belt (?), and horizontal lines across the thighs. The figure appears to be wearing kadaitcha (?) boots as described in the associated myth. In the attention to detail, style and depiction of movement this incised human figure differs markedly from the basic naturalism characteristic of western Queensland figurative art.

The associated mythology also has several features of interest. It includes a covert explanation for the unexpected absence of the wife. In the story the hero arrives to collect his wife but finds her absent. The colour of Lake Wonditti, is then described as 'milky'. This had seminal connotations and suggests that the wife may have absconded with another man.

The Glenormiston myth also differs in an important detail from other myths recorded in this region. The mythology of the Nappamerrie engraving site on Cooper Creek, provides an interesting contrast, as this appears to be the only rock art site in southwest Queensland for which details of the associated mythology have been recorded. These engravings comprise concentric arcs, upright lines, and circles, and refer to a 'murra murra' myth of the dog cult-totem of the Yanruwanto tribe (Elkin 1949/50).

'The petroglyphs are said to have been made by two "dog women", Widjini and Kilki mura (heroines), who camped at the spot and used to sit under the two big ti-trees nearby. A third slab was similarly and distinctly marked. My informant said it represented *poa*, a grass seed. The concentric arcs represented the falling of

the grass seed on a heap under the grinding stones.' (Elkin 1949/50, p. 141).

The Nappamerrie myth ends with the two heroines travelling up-stream to a spot called Malgera where they can still be seen as white stone. This type of transformation and residence at a specific locality is characteristic of the murra, or 'western' myths found throughout the Australian arid zone (See Allen 1972, p. 112). In northeast South Australia and southwest Queensland, murra myths were associated with patrilineal cult-totems, together with a philosophy of localised totem centres and clans (Elkin 1933, p. 138). Although not stated in Elkin's account, Malgera would certainly have served as a ceremonial centre of the local dog totem (cf. Spencer and Gillen 1912, pp. 96–7). The out-come of the myth associated with the Glenormiston incised stones differs in an important detail: the hero did not remain at a specific locality but left the earth and disappeared into a cloud. This trait is far more characteristic of Aboriginal mythology in SE. Australia with matrilineal, 'social' totemism and non-localised clans (Elkin 1933, p. 138).

To conclude, the Glenormiston material adds significantly to the little information available on the cultural and mythological context of Aboriginal art in southwest Queensland. Aspects of the cache also extend the range of material culture, art and mythology of the region beyond that previously recorded.

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